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TOASTMASTER®

Pete Weissman, CTM, CL, speaks from first-hand experience about the fast-paced world of professional speechwriting, having crafted speeches for prominent political and business leaders.

Pete Weissman:

Writing for CEOs and Senators

A prominent speechwriter offers an insider's look at a unique profession.

BY THE *TOASTMASTER* STAFF

When Pete Weissman, CTM, CL, presented an education session at the 2012 Toastmasters International Convention, he drew an audience eager to learn about speechwriting. Weissman did not disappoint. He spoke incisively, and from first-hand experience, about the fast-paced world of professional speechwriting, and shared tricks of the trade with the Toastmasters crowd.

Over the course of his award-winning career, Weissman has crafted speeches for prominent political and business leaders, including the chairman and CEO of The Coca-Cola Company. More than four years ago, he started his own firm in Atlanta, Georgia. It provides speechwriting and strategic-communications services to high-profile companies, foundations and associations. He has also worked in the White House and the United States Senate, as well as for various Fortune 100 executives.

When Weissman was writing speeches for the U.S. Senate, he joined the U.S. Senate Toastmasters club in Washington, D.C.

Q: Being a speechwriter is an unconventional job. How do you describe what you do?

A: I turn what a speaker wants to say into a talk an audience wants to hear. My job is to build a bridge between the speaker and the audience, so the speaker can share his or her ideas and personality in a way that will engage and persuade listeners.

When I've done my job, speakers say, "This sounds just like me," and audiences never knew I was there.

What's the difference between writing your own speech and writing words to put in another person's mouth? How do you develop an ear for another speaker's voice?

I find it's easier to write a speech for someone else because I can have a dialogue with the speaker and react to his or her ideas. When I write a speech for myself, I'm working alone without anyone to respond to.

To capture a speaker's voice, I listen to them when they're speaking without a script. I analyze their speaking style and determine if the speaker is more comfortable with stories or statistics, if they prove a point inductively or deductively, and if they are direct or go off on tangents. In general, it's better to write simply—with short declarative sentences that the speaker can make his own—than to write in a highly ornamented way that the speaker may stumble over.

> "When I've done my job, speakers say, 'This sounds just like me,' and audiences never knew I was there."

You've written for elected officials and corporate leaders. What's the difference between writing for senators and CEOs?

The biggest difference is that in politics, speeches are used to develop policy, but in business, speeches are used to *announce* policy. In politics, the process of speaking and debating an issue helps shape the resulting law. In business, the policy is developed internally and then announced through a speech.

Another difference is the freedom each speaker has. A member of the U.S. Congress can say almost anything thanks to the "Speech or Debate Clause" in the U.S. Constitution. For the CEO of a public company, however, there are times—like right before quarterly earnings are announced—when they can't talk about certain topics that might affect the stock price.

For both types of speakers, the stakes are high; they're just different. If a politician says the wrong thing, he could lose an election. If a CEO says the wrong thing, the stock price could fall.

What are the biggest challenges of writing a speech for a client?

Getting access and handling revisions. To capture someone's voice and thought process, you need to spend time with that person. If a speaker is too busy to provide access, the speech won't be successful.

Another challenge is when there are many different people weighing in with suggestions and edits to the speech draft. Sometimes in companies there is a battle between executives to shape the company's position. The speechwriter can get stuck in the middle of it.

On the positive side, a speech forces an organization to be clear about its priorities. Often, the speech becomes the vehicle that helps the organization gain the clarity it needs to be successful.

How quickly have you had to write a complete speech? What has been your most harrowing experience as a speechwriter?

When I worked in the U.S. Senate, there were several times when we had to schedule a press conference with just a few hours notice. Other times, we learned that a key bill would be coming up for debate on the Senate floor later that same day. When time is tight, you draw from past speeches and move quickly.

The most harrowing experience was when my senator was defending her bill on the Senate floor. Another senator attacked the legislation by quoting from a study. I was watching the debate on TV from my desk one block away from the Senate chamber. I thought the study he cited sounded odd, so I looked it up online. I found that the other senator had misrepresented its findings. The study actually supported our bill.

Well, I couldn't let that stand, so I quickly drafted a rebuttal. I was the only person who knew the truth, and I had to get my speech to my senator quickly. The vote would be called at any minute, and by then it would be too late. I ran through the underground tunnels that connect the Congressional office buildings to the Capitol building. I had a few mishaps along the way, but I got the speech to the senator just in time for her to include it in the Congressional Record. While her bill didn't win that day, I consider it a small victory for truth.

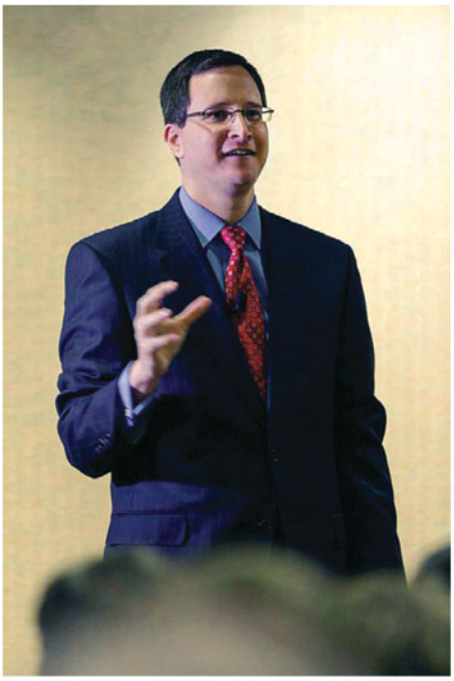
How would you suggest someone get started in this career?

Clients and employers will want to see what you've written for others, so build your skills, practice writing speeches and then volunteer to help a speaker.

First, immerse yourself in great speeches. Read Lincoln, Churchill, Kennedy and King. Read [the magazine] *Vital Speeches of the Day* each month and analyze the speeches. How did this speaker get attention? How did that speaker prove her point? How did this speaker use a theme?

Learn rhetorical devices like alliteration, anaphora, metaphor, parallelism and triads. These are the classic tools that speakers have used to engage audiences for centuries, and they really work. Learn how to write a sound bite that echoes in listeners' minds.

Read books like *10 Steps to Writing a Vital Speech* by Fletcher Dean; *Speak Like*



Pete Weissman advises audience members pursuing a career in speechwriting to learn how to write a sound bite that echoes in listeners' minds.

Churchill, Stand Like Lincoln, or *The Sir Winston Method*, both by James C. Humes; *The Political Speechwriter's Companion* by Robert Lehrman; and *How To Write and Give a Speech* by Joan Detz.

Practice being persuasive. Read an op-ed column in the newspaper and turn it into a short speech. Notice how you have to make the same points differently to write for the ear. Listen to a speech by a political leader and then write a short rebuttal speech.

Once you've built up your skills, volunteer to write speeches for others. Find a local charity that is having a gala or awards program and volunteer to write the remarks or the emcee's script. Find a local politician who is in sync with your views and volunteer to help write a speech or two.

How has your Toastmasters training helped you with your career?

I'm good with words, but it's hard for me to describe all the ways that Toastmasters has helped me become a better speechwriter, speaker and leader. I joined Toastmasters back when I lived in Washington, D.C. I was a proud member of the historic U.S. Senate Toastmasters club. [The club was featured in the December 2010 *Toastmaster* magazine, in an article called "Levity on Capitol Hill."]

I was a club officer, contestant in the International Speech Contest, and I even taught at Toastmasters Leadership Institutes. I couldn't imagine writing speeches for others without giving them myself. When one of my clients is preparing for a speech, I know what she's going through, and I know how to give helpful feedback. I've made so many friends through Toastmasters over the years, and speaking at the 2012 International Convention is a highlight of my career. T

For more information about Pete Weissman, visit ***www.peteweissman.com*** *or follow him on Twitter* ***@PeteWeissman****.*